

Monitoring Poverty in the Philippines



2000-10-27

Lois Sweet

[Photo: Gathering data on household poverty.]

The Philippine province of Palawan, composed of a narrow archipelago of 1,700 islands tucked along the western border of the Philippines, is breathtakingly beautiful — and poor. Many of its people do not have potable water, adequate sanitation facilities, or electricity. Many are illiterate, malnourished and cannot afford to buy shoes, or send their children to school.

When provincial officials sat down to plan the 1999 budget they were determined to change that reality. But the problems seemed formidable; Palawan suffers from inadequate infrastructure — an enormous obstacle to creating the kind of economic growth necessary to counter poverty. Education and health services desperately need huge injections of money, and resources are severely limited. Officials needed to systematize their approach.

Measuring quality-of-life

"We had planning exercises," says Josephine Escaño, a project evaluation officer with Palawan's Provincial Planning and Development Office. "But we didn't have a way of measuring the quality-of-life of households. We needed to find a way to measure that over the long haul so we could plan more efficiently and effectively."

So Escaño flew from Puerto Princesa, the capital of Palawan, to Manila to visit [Celia M. Reyes](#), Project Director for [MIMAP-Philippines](#) and Research Fellow at the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS). Launched in 1990 by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the [Micro Impacts of Macroeconomic Adjustment Policies \(MIMAP\)](#) program initiative aims to enhance the capacity of developing countries to analyse the impact of macroeconomic policies on their citizens.

Community-based poverty monitoring

Escaño had heard about the work that Dr Reyes had been doing on poverty monitoring since the early 1990s. Through detailed study of the range and variety of poverty surveys developed to gather poverty data in the Philippines, Dr Reyes had become convinced that the most useful data

gathering tool for local and national decision-makers would be a community-based poverty monitoring system that concentrates on core poverty at the household level. She led an initiative to design and pilot-test such a system, and has been collaborating with a broad range of government institutions (from local to national) to support its implementation in selected areas of the country.

Through this work, a community-based poverty monitoring system has emerged that is low-cost, easy-to-sustain, and capable of being conducted yearly by trained local field workers. Armed with information from such a system, planners and policy makers can make better-informed decisions on how best to tackle unmet needs. Through time, they will be able to monitor the impacts of programs, and determine whether the situation is improving, getting worse, or staying the same.

Development interventions

Development interventions should depend on what the information from the monitoring system is telling us about local problems and needs, says Dr Reyes. For example, if poverty monitoring data indicate that child malnutrition is a primary issue, officials can work with the community to consider such options as food assistance, vitamin or micronutrient supplementation, or nutritional education. If school drop-outs are a problem, the response can be based on further research into their cause. Is child labour needed in the field? Is transportation a problem? Are school supplies too expensive? Are more girls dropping out of school than boys? If so, why? With such information at hand, interventions can target problems efficiently and effectively.

Escaño was impressed with what she learned about the community-based poverty monitoring system and was optimistic about its potential to serve Palawan's development planning needs. Since then, provincial and local government officials have worked together to pilot and implement a community-based poverty monitoring program across Palawan, with technical support from the MIMAP-Philippines project. The information generated through the process is already having an effect on the transparency of decision-making.

Indicators

"Before we had these indicators, council made decisions based on 'I did this for you, so you do this for me'," says Eddie Aureno, Mayor of Quezon, a community of more than 10,000 households located in 14 barangays (villages). "But that's not a good way to make decisions. With the indicators we can see and compare problem areas and plan accordingly. Now everything is out in the open."

While poverty alleviation has been a major goal of the Philippine government since 1986, gathering the data to support poverty alleviation programs has been difficult. Regular surveys provide data on macro variables, such as the rate of inflation, the exchange rate, and the balance of trade. But there is no systematic and regular collection of information on the 'human dimension'. Surveys that measure income, housing, and the prevalence of malnutrition are not conducted yearly, thus reducing their relevance and impact. And the sample size makes them of little use to policy makers and planners at the municipal and barangay levels. The community-based poverty monitoring system is helping to change that.

Natural gas project

For example, a natural gas development promises to inject considerable funds into Palawan. "We want the community-based poverty monitoring system to be well established when that happens, so we can support the best, most appropriate projects in a totally transparent way," says Palawan

Governor Salvador Socrates. "We want to make wise, long-term decisions that will benefit everyone, and preserve our beautiful environment."

To that end, Jennifer A. Ore and Agripina L. Mozo devoted a day sitting in the heat of Quezon's municipal hall with 93 community members from 14 barangays learning how to be poverty monitors. "We want to help our barangays by seeing the true problems and needs," says Mozo. "Doing this work will help to solve them."

Essential data

She knows that the data they gather will be essential to that process. Instead of travelling to Manila, perhaps to gather dust on a library shelf, the data will be used in their own communities by their own people to solve their own problems.

As Mozo sits on the steps of a house built on stilts to raise it above the lapping waters of the South China Sea, she speaks gently to the homeowner, walking her through the survey. Children gather round, neighbours watch at a distance, and her trainer Zosimo Zabald, notes: "It takes a lot of time — almost an hour to gather all the survey information from each household. But all the people know it is confidential and is for their benefit. I'm happy to be part of this because I like to think that, in my own little way, I am contributing to life here."

Lois Sweet is an Ottawa-based writer. [Photo: courtesy of MIMAP initiative]

If you have any comments about this article, please contact info@idrc.ca.

For more information:

Dr Celia M. Reyes, MIMAP Project Director, Policy and Development Foundation, Inc., Unit 7B, Vernida I Condominium, 120 Amorsolo Street, Legaspi Village 1229 Makati City, Metro Manila, Philippines; Tel: (632) 892-7385; Fax: (632) 816-1091; Email: creyes@gate.pids.gov.ph

Links to explore ...

Sidebar: [MIMAP-Philippines: A Source of Policy Options in Times of Crisis](#)

[Monitoring and Evaluating Poverty Alleviation Programs in Peru](#), by Ken Eakin

[Monitoring Poverty in Bangladesh: Toward More Effective Poverty Alleviation Programs](#), by John Eberlee

[Reviewing Economic Reforms in Latin America and the Caribbean](#), by Keane Shore

[Micro Impacts of Macroeconomic and Adjustment Policies \(MIMAP\)](#)